

IN MEMORY
OF
CHARLES BEECHER

ADDRESS

BY

Rev. Henry R. McCartney,

AT THE

FUNERAL SERVICES

OF THE

REV. CHARLES BEECHER,

IN THE

First Congregational Church, Georgetown

Tuesday, May 1st., 1900.

GEORGETOWN, MASS.
THE ADVOCATE PRINTERS.
1900.

CHARLES BEECHER.

St. Paul told the early Christians that though they should have ten thousand tutors in Christ, yet had they not many fathers. This church has had many ministers, yet, in the last fifty years, it has had only one father. Other ministers have not been forgotten, but their work seems temporary compared with the profound and permanent influence exerted by the personality and teaching of Charles Beecher. When I was here the people spoke of him most often and lovingly, not as a former pastor, but as one who in a peculiar sense still belonged to them. Whenever he returned you decorated your church and welcomed him as a father. He had guided many of you into the faith, you had him baptize your children, and pray with you over your dead. When his birthday came round young and old remembered it with filial delight. I had to think of him always as my senior pastor; and as such he was an ideal one. He never intruded his opinions, never expressed a criticism or a doubt, but was always ready to encourage, advise, and assist, while he never failed to say an apprecia-

tive word. Had he been my own father, and supremely interested in my success, he could not have been more sympathetic and helpful.

It would be undesirable, were it possible, at this time to review adequately his work or portray his character. There is so much in a true life which evades description. Still, as we say farewell to him as a living man among us, and for the last time together give him our whole thought, it is well to consider some of the elements of strength and goodness in his life and character to the end that we may make more clear and permanent their influence on ourselves.

It is impossible to think of Charles Beecher apart from that noble family in whose remarkable traits he shared. Born with such an inheritance, and reared in that home of high thinking, he was introduced to a large world, and taught to give his thoughts and efforts seriously to things of real importance. While he did not rival in theological acumen Dr. Edward, nor in popular address, Henry Ward, nor in dramatic power, Harriet, nor in organizing talent, Thomas K., he excelled them in breadth of scholarship, in philosophic understanding, in exquisite literary style, and in poetic and spiritual insight. Those who were able to appreciate these powers will always remember him as a great man among great men.

As a scholar, he never lost his love of learning. In early life he became, under the guidance of the poet Longfellow, a linguist of remarkable attain-

ments. He read the Church Fathers in the Latin. At various times during his ministry he contributed to educational work. After he was sixty he read German philosophy in the original. He was widely acquainted with secular history and literature. After he had passed four score years he took up his pen to expound the vision of that apostle whom he was so like, and whose thought he knew so well.

He came into the ministry, as many of the best religious teachers have, through the door of skepticism, and consequently his religious thought was rather vital than formal. For creeds and the forms in which truths are stated he had a secondary concern. He had gone beyond these and apprehended the deep unbounded truth of which theologies are the human and partial expressions. God to him was more than a deduction of reason; He was a personal Father with whom he lived and talked, and in this communion his own life grew into divineness. The Atonement was more than a death on the cross, it was a divine life devoted to man's salvation. Heaven was more than a future state, it was the state of the soul living fully and eternally with God. The vision tarried, but when it broke upon him it was a vision splendid, and one that remained with him in increasing glory to the end.

Mr. Beecher was at heart a poet. He had the gift of seeing into the heart of things, while visible forms were illumined by their spiritual meaning. Outward things, even language and forms of thought

were the symbolical expressions of great spiritual truths. One had to appreciate this faculty to understand fully his teaching, for it gave color to his theology, while imparting to his preaching that exquisite literary charm in which people of culture took such delight. His views of the sorrow of God and of pre-existence were of this nature. Behind them, to those who could interpret rightly, were great and vital truths. Plato taught pre-existence and recounted myths, but with the spiritual insight of a true poet. As truth is more vital than facts, poetry is more instructive than dogmatics. Mr. Beecher was a teacher in this higher realm.

Akin to this was his thoroughly human spirit. The whole world lay near his heart. In every realm of life he found his kindred. This enabled him to enrich his sermons so naturally by vivid illustrations from all fields of life. He gleaned in the great field of human thought, and cultivated with equal delight the little field of his private garden. The flower was to him more than stem and petals, it had a personality and a message. The past lived over for him its passionate life, and the future unfolded its visions. In the world of men all were brothers. He could converse with the philosopher and become a companion to the slave boy with equal ease. He could pray with the saint and be the friend of the drunkard in his poverty. There was no cause too great to be aided by his counsel, and no heart too simple to receive his love. It was this which made him so large,

tender, and personal in his sympathy. It made the most inferior love him for he was in spirit the kindred of all.

We cannot understand Mr. Beecher without thinking of his power of music. Music, men tell us, is the language of the Universe—the language in which all great and interpretive thinkers must express their ideas. It is also the language of the heart. Mr Beecher lived in the whole compass of music. From the simplest folk song or child melody to the symphonies which interpret the universal order, the great movements of humanity or the unspoken tragedies of the soul, all were familiar to him. When I knew him his lyre was mute, but within he harkened to a music which no earthly instrument ever made, and he often said that his poor deaf ears would soon hear the music of the new Jerusalem. But many of you can remember that he spent delightful hours in his home and in the church playing on the old violin, which, perhaps now in the hands of one to whom he gave something of his own rich nature, is pouring out its sweet melody in her distant home. All this helped to give harmony to his character and richness and beauty to his thought.

He was a man of rare mirth. With what quickness and sympathy he saw whatever was ludicrous. What delightful stories he would tell. How his face would light up at some rich joke. There was always something in life, except in its most serious moments, something on which his fancy could play and lend

itself to a laugh, that laugh which preserves youth and power.

Yet all these elements were clothed, even to being hidden with goodness, to the analytical observer. Scholarship he had. Strength of action he had. Insight and mirth he had, but they all were suffused with that gentleness and loving spirit which made the predominate impression, just as the oak hides its strength of fibre with festoons of summer vines and stands before us as a thing of beauty. After all, it was this goodness, which took up into itself and transfigured all other qualities, that gave him his great power over men; a power that made them think nobler thoughts and live better lives. As it is said of Lamartine, that the mob laid down their arms before him because he represented seventy years of noble living, we lay aside all bitter and selfish thoughts in the presence of one who so perfectly represented the simplicity and the glory of a true character.

It was his beautiful character, rather than his wisdom or his work, that made Charles Beecher a father to his people. You have forgotten most of his sermons, and many of the things he did, but you can never outlive or undo the sweet and silent influence of his life on your own. You may not all have become Christians in the full sense as he wanted you to, but you are not what you were before. A sense of the importance of things spiritual, a deep reverence for what is good, a spirit of kindliness and charity, a nobleness of thought in your silent and secret mo-

ments when characters are being formed, an ideal of life not wholly worldly have entered into you and will grow with the growth of experience. You pay your loving tribute to him today, but you owe him a debt which you will not fully know until you wake up in his likeness.

His life was not without its full measure of sorrow and trials and opposing forces. He lived at a time when a true life had to be heroic. His heart went out to the slave in his oppression. He saw his dearest friends suffer and fall in that struggle for freedom. He went through his trying experience here when his thought was with one lying in a southern hospital. He saw his children brought home to him wrapped in winding sheets and in the colors of his country. He saw the one on whom he had leaned through many years pass on before him, yet all these trials but contributed to his own growth in spirituality. I would make no allusion to his ecclesiastical experience further than to say that he lived at a time when questions of heresy were taken seriously. We younger men have seen so many of the church's best scholars and preachers branded as heretics, only to take, like Maurice and Robertson Smith and Prof. Swing, a larger place in the heart of humanity, that we can not regard such things as calamities. They are vain in effect, vain as the storm that sweeps the ocean. They do not result in conversion of sinners; they do not conserve the faith a particle; Christianity has progressed just the same as though they never

had been. We are inclined to attribute an importance to them which they do not have. Still there is one result of all this, and that is the personal effect of them on the man concerned. Some men under these circumstances grow harsh and narrow and pugnacious. Others, bearing them with true spirit, grow sweeter and larger and more spiritual. So it was with Mr. Beecher. His experience may have discouraged him for a while. It may have robbed his life of popular opportunities, but out of it all he rose a kindlier, grander, diviner man. May we not forget the circumstances out of which his character grew, and remember only the character which resulted in his precious and enduring contribution to this community?

What most impressed one in his later years was his clear apprehension of the things unseen and eternal. He had come into that purity of heart in which he could see God; his life had become the clear mirror in which the heavenly life was reflected. The spiritual imagery of the Master and St. John's apocalyptic vision were to him vivid realities. He waited, as he often said, for the laying aside of the worthless, hampering body, that he might live in the fullness of the life that he contemplated. Even in his physical failure there was something beautiful. He gradually retreated in memory from his later experiences to those of his earlier life. When I last saw him, he did not know me, but when he was told that I was from Amherst, he said, "Yes, that was Henry's college,"

and then went over the pleasures and dreams of his school-day life. So he passed quietly back to the heaven that lay about him in his infancy, until his renewed child heart took its place in the kingdom of his Father. There is an especial appropriateness in that poem which he so loved, with its setting of the sea and the twilight and the evening star and the vesper bells calling to worship, and the harbor bar still in the full evening tide.

“Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me,
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too fast for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark;
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark.

For tho' from out our bounds of Time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face,
When I have crost the bar.

The evening came and the star shone and the moaning bar became quiet and he passed out on its full tide to meet his pilot, to exchange the temporal for the eternal, the trials and struggles of earth for the peace and glory of heaven. Let there be no moaning of farewell today. He has gone home. He has been lifted up from the Patmos of his vision into

the New Jerusalem which he knew so well.

I ask you to sing again that hymn which we have so often sung together. I loved to give it out, not simply because it was Mr. Beecher's, although in sentiment and poetic charm it will be associated with him as long as Christian worship endures, but because it is the most beautiful and perfect expression of our Christian faith in the life above.

We are on our journey home,
Where Christ our Lord is gone;
We shall meet around His throne,
When he makes His people one
In the new Jerusalem.

We can see that distant home,
Tho' clouds rise dark between;
Faith views the radiant dome,
And a luster flashes keen
From the new Jerusalem.

O glory shining far
From the never setting Sun!
O trembling morning star!
Our journey's almost done
To the new Jerusalem.

O holy, heavenly home!
O, rest eternal there!
When shall the exiles come,
Where they cease from earthly care,
In the new Jerusalem.

Our hearts are breaking now
Those mansions fair to see;
O Lord! Thy heavens bow,
And raise us up with Thee
To the new Jerusalem.